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ABSTRACT

One of the conditions set forth in the hiring of the new superintendent of a southeast Texas school district was that a reduction in force would be accomplished. How this process, that usually involves six months planning time and and additional year to carry out, was accomplished in a period of six months is detailed in this speech. An analysis of the reduction in force program reveals that its strengths were planning, involvement of principals, support of the school board, support of the media, and the superintendent's ability to be less than popular and take the heat in his first year in the district. Program weaknesses were identified as the failure to identify maximum class size early in the discussion, failure to involve the teacher association earlier in the planning stages, the fact that the district waited until the situation was of such a magnitude that drastic action was necessary, and referring to employees as "excess" or "surplus." (MLF)

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# REDUCTION IN FORCE: IS YOUR BOARD PREPARED?

This presentation on staff reduction will be divided into five parts. The first will be a perspective of our school district, the second will give a short summary of how positions in Texas are funded, the third and hopefully the most important part will be the process used in our district to reduce the staff, the fourth section will be the factors which we think contributed to the success of the program and the final section those parts of the program that we would do differently if given the opportunity to relive the process.

## Background

The West Orange-Cove School District is located in deep Southeast Texas. Our school district ends in the Sabine River, which is the boundary between Texas and Louisiana, and we are approximately 20 miles from the Gulf of Mexico. Our student population is 5,500 in grades K through 12. We employ 377 teachers, 61 administrators, 41 aides, 62 clerical personnel and have an operating budget of $14 million. A quick look will indicate that our pupil-teacher ratio is approximately 15 to 1. We spend approximately $2,188 per pupil for educational purposes. We realize that the method we used to determine the calculation and the method used by your district may vary somewhat.

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Texas does not have a collective bargaining agreement but our local school district has for some time had a consultation agreement with the Classroom Teachers Association which represents the majority of the teachers. During the past two years our area of the State has been targeted by the American Federation of Teachers as the prime area in which to gain a foothold and become the representative of the teachers.

We are a petrochemical city with 65% of our tax base provided by the petrochemical industries located within our boundaries. The industries have had a history of strong support of the educational program of our school district.

## State Funding

The State gives a weighted unit value to each employee except those classified as maintenance, custodial or cafeteria employees. For example, the superintendent of a school district our size has a value of 2.0 and a teacher aide has a value of .55. A teacher, regardless of the degree earned or step on the salary schedule, has a unit value of 1.0.

A district earns the total number of units based on the average daily attendance of pupils by categories. In grades K through 3 one unit is earned for every 18.5 pupils in average daily attendance, grades 4-5 it is one one unit for every 21 pupils in attendance, in grades 7-9 it is one unit for each 20 students in average daily attendance, while 18 students in average daily attendance earns one unit for grades 10 through 12. The district is given a

total number of state-supported units which they may use in any way with one restriction. The district must employ at least one teacher for every 25 students in ADA on a districtwide basis. Unit allocation is based on current average daily attendance. This works a hardship on a school district which has a declinining enrollment. You hire teachers at the start of the year only to determine at the end of the year that a number of them will not be supported by State funds.

I was hired as Superintendent in early August of 1978. One of the conditions set forth in my hiring was that a reduction in force would be accomplished. Staff reduction had been something that had been talked about for a number of years but had not been achieved. This along with the mandate for a sound evaluation system formed the background under which I assumed the superintendency of a district.

## Process Used

Fortunately I had listened to a number of presentations regarding staff reduction at meetings such as this and had also attended a NASE seminar dealing with reduction in force. That input served as the basis for my approach. Initially, I spend a considerable amount of time studying the literature on staff reduction and talking with people who had gone through a reduction in force. One of the topics that was thoroughly investigated was the effect of class size on learning.

The second step was to do a five-year study of enrollment trends versus staffing trends. This study indicated that the average daily attendance in the school district had dropped from 6,000 students to approximately 5,100 over the five-year period. During the same period of time state funding had dropped from 360 to 323 approved units, while the local district had increased the funding of local units from 101 to 184. The situation was one of declining enrollment and increasing staff. Increased special education services and several other factors contributed to this situation.

The third step was to provide each principal with the data for their school. This data provided their average daily attendance for the first three six weeks periods of the school year and a summary of the total number of units earned under the funding formula. Principals were then asked to complete a form which indicated the number of units actually employed in their building. This provided the principal with a look at his building regarding the number of units funded by the State versus the number of units totally supported by local funds. Each principal was then asked to reduce his staff by 40% and still maintain the well-balanced program described in the state accreditation standards. Reductions were to be listed in priority order. It was quite interesting to see what principals recommended for staff reduction. The process was quite simple at the elementary school but became complicated at the secondary school level.

At the secondary level, in addition to completing the staff reduction survey we asked each principal to look at the current pupil-teacher ratio for every teacher employed. We found only one academic teacher in the entire district had a pupil-teacher ratio of over 27 pupils. One teacher had a pupil-teacher ratio of 9.

The fourth step in the process was to make our school board aware of the data which had been gathered. The information was compiled in a written report and presented to the board. Based on this presentation the President of the School Board appointed an ad hoc committee on staff reduction. Several meetings were held with this committee at which time we carefully reviewed the school staffing patterns, funding, class size and costs. Based on our goals, which had been reduced considerably from the 40%, a recommendation was made regarding class size. We said that class size in kindergarten through grade three would not exceed 25, would not exceed 27 in grades four through five, and in general academic classes in grades six through twelve they would not exceed 28. Our phase one classes which are the low achieving classes, would not exceed 22 pupils at the secondary level. Laboratory courses would be limited to the number of work stations in the labs and physical education classes would not exceed 35 pupils. After reviewing this data with the principals it was determined that we could reduce our staff by 20 teachers, 9 aides, 3 clerks and one administrator. Reductions were identified by elementary, middle and high school levels. We specifically stated we would reduce elementary teachers by 7, middle school by 5 and so on.

The sixth step in the process was, in my judgment, the most critical. The ad hoc committee of the school board took the document I had written and presented it as a recommendation to the full board. This recommendation was unanimously approved by the board in an open board meeting. The action made it clear to all staff members that the staff reduction had the complete support and backing of the school board. The ad hoc committee was extremely supportive in this action. In the determination of those who would be reduced from the staff we hoped that attrition would take care of most of these positions. Early on in our examination of the staffing needs and the staffing patterns we determined that elementary and middle school teachers who had three years or more of experience would not be involved in the reduction. At the high school level a teacher had to have at least four years of experience to be on the safe side in regard to the staff reduction. The four year employment criteria also held true for aides and clerical people. This reduced the tension level in the district for everyone except those people who had less than four years continuous service with the district. In addition, we put a moratorium on hiring after the first of the year. Any teacher, teacher aide or clerical person who was employed as a replacement was told that they were a temporary employee and that their contract was only for the remainder of the year. This was put in writing and made a part of their file.

In the reduction, the teaching staff was considered by three divisions: elementary, middle and high school. The criteria used in the reduction of the staff were the following: certification, length of continuous service in the school district, contract status, evaluation for the past three years and attendance. The contract status caused some problems. We had some teachers on one-year contracts and some teachers on two-year contracts. We do not have tenure. If a teacher was going to be on the second year of a two-year contract we were obligated to pay that teacher and that was taken into consideration when we reduced our staff. Generally the primary consideration was certification and length of service in the district. Absenteeism was examined over a three-year period, and consideration was given to one long term illness.

When the process of identification of staff to be terminated was in draft stage I met with the Classroom Teachers Association consulation group to finalize the document and to get their support. We continually stressed that the reduction in force policy would be used only if attrition did not take care of the number of staff positions. We further agreed to notify all teachers by April 1 if they were not going to be employed or if there was a possibility they would not be employed.

The identification of elementary teachers presented no problems because of certification. At the middle school and the high school level certification created some problems for us. However, by careful reorganization principals were able to keep within the guidelines of our staff reduction plan. When the people were identified I visited with each one regarding their termination. They

were told that they would be placed on a preferential hiring list and rehiring would be based on length of service to the district. They would be kept on the list for two years unless they found employment in another school district. Employment outside the education field would not be considered to eliminate them from the preferential hiring list. By April 1 attrition had reduced the number of positions from 33 to 14. The discussion with these 14 people was most interesting. The reaction to my meeting with them was anywhere from anger to sympathy for my position in having to carry out the reduction in force. The majority understood the need and conducted themselves admirably. Everyone was notified both personally and by letter prior to the April 1 deadline. Prior to August 15 we were able to employ or offer employment to all but one teacher who had been terminated. The one teacher was an art teacher who had certification in no other area.

## Program Strengths or Successes

In my judgment the planning that was done contributed the most to the success of the program. The historical perspective gave everyone information about exactly what was happening. The data was presented in personnel and dollar figures. This was quite revealing.

The second strength of the program was the involvement of principals in the process. Each principal was required to look at his building, its needs and personnel available. It also required them to see how they could better use their personnel and to become actively involved in the decision as to who would be reduced from their staff.

The ad hoc committee of the board and their support and the total support of the plan received by the school board was critical. The approval of the plan in an open meeting and the close working relationship between the superintendent and the ad hoc committee was crucial to the success of the program.

A fourth factor was the close cooperation that developed between the total administrative staff. We all hung in there together and were able to accomplish our goals with what we considered to be a minimum of upheaval.

The support of the media was helpful. They reported factually without the usual emotional overtones that accompany such actions. They were kept informed of the status of the program as we proceeded.

One point I like to think was important to the success of the program was the superintendent's ability to be less than popular and take the heat in his first year in the district. The attempt on the part of the superintendent to make information available to staff, the board and to teachers was, I think, also important. Each week the superintendent had breakfast with a different faculty and answered first hand any and all questions asked. They were given information that was factual and was up to date as possible.

## Program Weaknesses

In retrospect the major problem in the process was the failure to identify maximum class sizes early in the discussion. The failure to do this created

problems for administrators and board members. There was considerable discussion, by particularly the leadership of AFT, regarding what the addition of one child per class would do to the learning outcomes. This caused concern among parents who then transmitted their concerns to me and to board members. Much of the hassle could have been reduced had we done a better job in this area.

A second weakness was failure to involve the Classroom Teacher Association earlier in the planning stages. I had some underlying reasons for not doing this which did not prove to be true and again with 20/20 hindsight I would involve the Classroom Teachers group earlier on, particularly as the reduction affected the financial position of the district. The biggest pressure brought on board members was by parents and teachers and concerned class size. The teacher concerns, from Day One was who would be caught in the reduction. As soon as the reduction was announced teachers wanted to know "Am I going to be fired?" It was very difficult for teachers to accept the announcement and be told the plan had not been finalized and that it would take some time to finalize a plan.

Another pitfall of the program would be in the form of an admonition. We would recommend that a district not wait too long to start a reduction in force. The first one is bound to be the most traumatic. If a reduction can be accomplished through attrition with little fanfare this would be more acceptable

than to wait until the situation is of such a magnitude that you have to take drastic action.

The final problem associated with the program was a new superintendent who came in and brought the idea that we had too many teachers and that everybody had to be evaluated. These two factors, plus the use made of them by segments of the staff, created some real problems. It possibly would have been better to wait a while for the reduction to be made but this was not possible in our case. As a personal observation I would suggest that anyone needing to conduct a reduction in force not refer to employees as excess or surplus. This phrase was used to my disadvantage both in the reduction of force and in other programs we attempted to put into operation. I would use some term as "units not funded by the state" or "units funded locally."

In summary, I believe we carried off a program in a period of six months that usually involves six months planning time and an additional year to carry out. We did it with what we considered to be minimum problems. This not the only way to conduct a RIF program but this is what worked for us.